



World Chronicle

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HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS

"Recently, there has been more humanitarian workers killed in the field than United Nations peace-keeping soldiers," says Under-Secretary-General Sergio Vieira de Mello, who heads the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. In this interview, Mr. Vieira de Mello discusses various aspects of the role of his office in wars and natural and manmade disasters.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's World Chronicle.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Conflicts, natural disasters, refugees. These are the pictures that fill our television screens nightly. They are humanitarian emergencies, often complex situations, in which the lives of millions of people are at risk. Providing emergency relief in these situations involves many organizations, from UN agencies to national governments, including voluntary organizations. But how are all these efforts coordinated?

Our guest today is Under-Secretary-General Sergio Vieira de Mello, who heads the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Joining me to talk with Mr. Vieira de Mello are Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times* and Tuyet Nguyen of *DPA*, the *German Press Agency*.

Mr. Vieira de Mello welcome to **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Under-Secretary-General, yours is a fairly recent Agency. How were these humanitarian emergency situations handled before your Office was set up and you became the Coordinator.

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Well, we had a Department of Humanitarian Affairs that existed until December of last year and that, by and large, attempted to do that same coordination that you were referring to. But ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you applying a more precise focus?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: I was going to say it. The Secretary-General, in last year's reform proposals, felt that this new Office should be more focused, that the Department of Humanitarian Affairs had spread out into too many areas which required refocussing and that was what he did and one of the roles is coordination, the other one is advocacy, and the third one is policy development. This new Office has no operational tasks as such which DHA, over the years, had assumed – the previous Department, I mean.

LITTLEJOHNS: So, when you say 'no operational tasks', what are you doing?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Well, the operational tasks are performed by operational agencies and perhaps, the error in the past was for a department that belonged to the Secretariat to expand into operational areas when it had neither the resources nor the expertise to do so. Therefore, we have, I repeat, refocussed the tasks of the new Office and concentrating on coordination of the activities of operational agencies both within the United Nations system and outside.

LITTLEJOHNS: And you have people out in the field?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: We have a few people in the field when there is a need to reinforce the existing coordination capacity at the field level. But, with the exception of Afghanistan, we don't have any operational coordination office of our own.

LITTLEJOHNS: Critics of the United Nations – the United Nations Secretariat – often say that there is duplication, replication of responsibility in the Organization and the Organization could operate just as effectively or more effectively with fewer people. Here, there seems to be a situation where you've added another element to something which was functioning reasonably well before.

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Not quite. When the previous Department of Humanitarian Affairs was created, the feeling existed among Member States that the duplication you referred to needed to be addressed, in an effective manner, through a strong coordination mechanism within the United Nations System and, as I said, involving also, whenever possible, agencies that do not belong to the UN System, in particular, Non-Governmental Organizations. Now, that is not an addition. That is a role that Member States felt was lacking.

NGUYEN So, let's say in case of serious earthquake and there are thousands dead and the government immediately call the UN to help, what would you do then and what will be the responsibilities of the other agencies?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: That's a good question. We have, in Geneva, the Disaster Response Branch which immediately dispatches to the stricken area by whatever – an earthquake or a technological or an environmental disaster, as has been the case recently in Indonesia and in Brazil – dispatches a disaster assistance and coordination team that reinforces the ability of the government and of the UN System, on the spot, to react in a coordinated fashion to that particular disaster while at the same time, assessing needs and issuing an appeal for international support.

NGUYEN And you will be the only Coordinator in this case.

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Yes, with exceptions of course in Indonesia, for instance. The main coordination role is being played by the UN Environmental Programme because that disaster has particular impact on the environment but the effort is joint – our Office and UNEP.

LITTLEJOHNS: United Nations Environment Programme - UNEP.

VIEIRA DE MELLO: That's right.

CROSETTE: In an age of so much civil conflict, we hear the catch phrase now 'complex emergencies'. I just thought maybe you can explain a little bit about what that means nowadays and also there also has been some complex responses — there has been some

more looking at what you do, for example, with the displaced population. Do you just care for them or you try to give them a little bit of education or training or how do you deal with these people who are left behind by civil war?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Well, I think your two questions are inter-related because these two catch words, 'complex emergencies', in fact, are a misnomer. What we mean is civil conflict, internal conflict, i.e., the majority of the conflicts the United Nations and the International Community have had to respond to in recent years, unfortunately. Therefore, these types of conflicts, which are more complex perhaps than the previous conventional, international conflicts that we were used to, have caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands and millions of persons within the boundaries of that particular country – not across international borders, in which case, they become refugees in international law – and assistance to internally displaced persons and protection to internally displaced persons as we have seen in the cases of the former Yugoslavia and Bosnia, Herzegovina, in particular, are extremely difficult tasks for humanitarian agencies to perform because they usually are required to perform those tasks in a hostile environment targeted by the parties to the conflict that seldom understand principles such as neutrality and impartiality and tend to identify humanitarian agencies with the enemy, as it were. So you put the finger on a tricky issue for humanitarian agencies – how to adequately support and protect these majority today of internally displaced population.

CROSETTE: It's become actually a phenomenon, has it not – the attack on people working not only for international agencies, but for private groups, and so on. How do you cope with these? What are you trying to do?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Thank you for that question because it's one that obviously worries heads of humanitarian agencies and does not often catch the attention of the media or the public at large except when our colleagues actually die. You should know that there have been more humanitarian workers killed in recent years than there have been soldiers dying in peace-keeping operation which is, I think, a telling proof of what I said earlier about the complexity of the new types of conflicts we're faced with. Now, what are we trying to do? Well, it's clearly a problem of imposing certain standards of behaviour on forces that are not conventional military forces that are unruly, uncontrolled, undisciplined forces that do not obey to any central command and therefore, as a rule, do not respect rules. So that is the 'catch 22' situation we find ourselves in. One of the ideas is that attacks against humanitarian workers should be criminalized in international law and our hope, for instance, is that the new International Criminal Court that we hope will be established in 1998 at the Rome Diplomatic

Conference in June-July this year will recognize such crimes as falling within its purview. That might be a step in the right direction in the sense of putting an end to this impunity that killers of humanitarian workers have enjoyed.

LITTLEJOHNS: About how many people have been killed in humanitarian work?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: I try not to remember those macabre statistics, but I think the figure is around 40 persons in the last four years.

LITTLEJOHNS: And that's more than got killed in UN peacekeeping operations?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Oh, definitely.

NGUYEN You are also in charge of an early warning system. Can you explain to us how this work, you know, what will trigger your coordination?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Yes. It does not necessarily trigger any coordination mechanism because early warning is there to monitor the situation in countries that are prone either to a natural disaster or to a complex emergency to an internal conflict which, fortunately, does not always materialize. But when it does, the early warning mechanism should help us gather around the same table those agencies that are likely to have to intervene if a natural disaster or a major humanitarian man-made emergency were to develop and agree, beforehand, on the respective roles of each agency depending on what scenario actually materializes.

NGUYEN Is this something that goes on or let's say almost on a daily basis or do you really work – you know that system – does it work only when there is or when you foresee a disaster coming?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Yes.

CROSETTE: If you have an intelligence service – I guess that's the way to look at it then

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Well, I wouldn't call it an intelligence service ...

CROSETTE: Right – newsmen think ...

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Exactly. It's not equipped or mandated for that. But I mean there are certain indicators – you are one of them – the media is one of our indicators as it were. We also have a presence on the ground. We have other sources of information. And when several indicators are there, when the red light starts flashing, then we activate the coordination mechanism.

NGUYEN Let me cite the example of the fires in Indonesia. People know about this only when it has destroyed thousands and thousands of acres and the smoke, you know, for all of Southeast Asia. Why something like this has not been told to the world when it happened or before it happened?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Well, let me say that in 1997, last year, you remember there was a similar disaster affecting Indonesia. A lot was said then about what needed to be done to prevent a recurrence of that disaster. Now there are certain phenomena that we have little control over – the El Niño phenomenon, which affects, in particular, the Pacific Ocean and, therefore, countries that are found in that area is not something we can actually deal with. But what we can do is prevent consequences over which we have control and this, you should also bear in mind, can only happen if the governments concerned actually seek the support of the United Nations. We cannot impose our assistance or prevention mechanisms on them.

NGUYEN Are they also part of the warning system – the governments?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Yes indeed, they are, which does not necessarily mean that they respond rapidly or timely to crisis that are likely to affect themselves. There is often a timidity, a shyness on the part of governments. They are not always prepared to acknowledge that something is about to happen that may perhaps affect the image of that country or even to turn to the International Community for assistance. There is a pride, there is shyness, as I said, and governments should perhaps attempt to overcome those psychological difficulties and seek international support because the willingness to assist them is very much there.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Under-Secretary-General Sergio Vieira de Mello, who heads the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Barbara Crossette?

CROSSETTE: One of the interesting debates that's arisen lately over humanitarian work in general – and it's perhaps not new but revived debate – is over the role of humanitarian agencies and even volunteers and so on and in cases, for example, of huge refugee concentrations where there is civil war, the Secretary-General has very recently talked about this in Africa, where people with all the best intentions end up criticized for having fed people, for having clothed and housed people who made, in fact, the rearming for the next round of civil conflict. This was, of course, the case in what was then Eastern Zaire and you were in UNHCR and probably saw this firsthand. Where is this debate leading? What's it about.

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Yes. Well, first of all, let me say that some of that criticism is justified and I recently requested that a study be carried out that would look into criticism that have been recently formulated – levelled against humanitarian agencies – to determine which are fair and must be addressed and which are farfetched and need not be paid attention to. Now, you've referred to one very serious problem that affected in particular Rwandan and Burundian refugee communities in Eastern Zaire and, to a lesser extent, in Northwestern

Tanzania in recent years. Now, the unfairness of the criticism is that the International Community could not expect humanitarian agencies – UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, the NGOs – that were working with us to actually proceed with the separation of military or paramilitary elements, the identification of those criminals responsible for the genocide in Rwanda from the rest of the innocent civilian population. You cannot ask humanitarian agencies to do that. That is a responsibility that either the host government or an international military or police force should assume and carry out. Zaire was not prepared to do that. The United Nations, at the political level, were not prepared to provide humanitarian agencies with that kind of support in '94 - '95 when that separation could have taken place. So humanitarian agencies were left with this dilemma, and there are many dilemmas humanitarian agencies faced these days, either to abandon the innocent majority to their fate or to remain there at the risk of indeed feeding criminals. It was a difficult call, but I presume, the majority of people with ethics would probably have decided to do what humanitarian agencies did. Much against their will, believe you me.

NGUYEN You know, internally, among the UN agencies devoted to humanitarian assistance, I wonder if the overlapping programmes and overlapping responsibilities have been solved by the UN reform and the role of NGOs, for example – how did you work with all those agencies and NGOs to make it a very effective assistance?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Well, if we give you, perhaps, an example rather than speculating the abstract – if you look at Afghanistan today, we have, through hard work on the ground because it's usually at the field level that you solve these problems – we have managed to develop a common assistance strategy for Afghanistan that involves, not only UN agencies, but also Non-Governmental Organizations and the community of donor countries. This effort, which is time-consuming as you can imagine, should lead in 1999 to a common programme. We have also established, as you know, consolidated appeals for international financial support to humanitarian emergencies that bring together the needs of all the agencies and, in the case of Afghanistan again, we have managed to include the non-governmental community in our consolidated appeal. These appeals are prepared by my Office. I have issued several so far in 1998. In total, I will be asking for two billion dollars for humanitarian assistance programmes across the world in 1998. It may sound like a large figure – in fact, it's negligible. It's one day of military expenditure in today's world.

LITTLEJOHNS: But that's not really the way the governments look at it.

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Unfortunately not.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you expect to raise the two billion dollars?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: We never managed to raise the totality of the funds we look for. To give you an example, I chaired the meeting in Geneva sometime ago on the consequences of Chernobyl. Twelve years after that major technological disaster, there are still hundreds of thousands of victims in Bélarus in the Russian Federation in Ukraine. Our appeal was for a hundred million dollars for targetted, very viable, very concrete projects. I only managed to raise 1.5 million dollars. That just gives you an idea of the extent of disinterest over time for the consequences of such major humanitarian tragedy.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about the situations in Sierra Leone and Liberia which has been pretty terrible in the last few months – years. What's happening there now?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: As you know, in Liberia, the situation has fortunately stabilized. We have a programme there. We have a political presence. We are raising funds, again, with much difficulty, for the repatriation of Liberian refugees from neighbouring countries and their reintegration in Liberia. But as the programme proceeds, donors realize that we mean business. That the work that is being done contribute, in fact, to stability and peace in Liberia and funds are coming in. It's much more difficult in Sierra Leone. I launched a flash appeal in February 1998 for Sierra Leone. I have managed to raise zero dollars for that flash appeal so far. But this is probably because the situation is only now beginning to improve and, I believe, donors are waiting for a certainty that peace is there to remain before they actually open their purses and contribute to the programme.

LITTLEJOHNS: But while they're waiting to open their purses, what's happening to the people in Sierra Leone?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: What happens is that agencies that are operating on the ground are using their existing resources, which are by definition limited, or diverting assistance from other areas that are considered to be less pressing than Sierra Leone at present.

CROSETTE: The United Nations has a very unusual situation in Iraq, a new set of problems and perhaps challenges arise where many people outside perhaps know what this money that is coming in under the limited oil sales should be going for but that everything has to be negotiated very carefully in a very tense political environment. How do you look at the Iraq situation? What kind of things could the UN perhaps be doing more to help the people who are suffering?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: Well, what is now being done for them – you're referring to the Oil for Food Programme – is an important step in that direction, admittedly insufficient. I think we've got to be very clear – humanitarian assistance is not intended to cover the entire spectrum of the needs of civilian populations in situations such as Iraq is going through. One

has to target what we call 'vulnerable groups'. They are the priority of humanitarian agencies leaving other groups, other types, other categories of civilian populations, to fend for themselves, as it were. Not least since resources, as I said, the financial resources are limited. Now, your question is interesting because today, this very afternoon, we will be having informal discussions with Members of the Security Council on how to improve the targeting of sanctions and sparing, to the extent possible, civilian populations from the consequences of sanctions. I think that is the way to go forward. Members of the Council are very interested in improving the effectiveness of sanctions which are intended to punish or change the behaviour of a regime, but not of the civilian populations living under that regime and this distinction, which is often difficult to make, is what we are working on with the Members right now.

NGUYEN You know, as a Coordinator of humanitarian assistance, I wonder if you have any model from which you follow in reply to a situation?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: There are different models and I'm grateful for that question. One of them is to use the mechanism in place. We have, in most countries of the world, a United Nations Resident Coordinator who, in case of humanitarian emergency, becomes also the humanitarian coordinator. That is the simplest mechanism which we, from New York, can reinforce by sending staff that have experience in the coordination of humanitarian affairs in emergency situations to assist the Resident Coordinator. If the emergency were to be particularly complex, we could establish a separate mechanism that will depend on the particular situation. Or, if the problem is one affecting refugees only, one could decide to acquaint what we call a lead agency. In this case, it would be the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. If it was mainly a problem of internally displaced persons, another single agency could be identified – World Food Programme or UNICEF. So there are different models. There is no single universal model. Each emergency has its own peculiarities and has to be looked at in that perspective.

NGUYEN Are you also staffed 24 hours a day or just, you know, working hours office like the rest of the UN?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: No, we have perhaps like the operational agencies that we support longer hours than other offices, although I wouldn't want to compare. There are many people who work longer hours in this building contrary to what the public, at times, may believe. But let me put it this way – it is only the Disaster Response Branch in Geneva that is staffed to 24 hours a day because they need to respond instantly to natural disasters. For other complex emergencies, we're obviously available 24 hours a day but not necessarily in this building.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Under-Secretary-General, we have only a few seconds left.

We have not talked very much about, if at all, about human rights. Are you involved in human rights questions?

VIEIRA DE MELLO: I am a firm believer that humanitarianism, humanitarian principles, the mere principle of humanity, which humanitarian agencies are based upon, must be subsumed eventually under the human rights system. Our cooperation with the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, Mrs. Robinson, is very close indeed.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Vieira de Mello, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Under-Secretary-General Sergio Vieira de Mello, who heads the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. He was interviewed by Barbara Crossette of *The New York Times* and Tuyet Nguyen of *DPA the German Press Agency*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.